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Report: Dead Creek not a health hazard

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CAHOKIA — High levels of PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls) found in the north part of Dead Creek ditch pose no immediate threat to public health and safety, state officials said today.

James Kelly, a chemist and member of the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency's Emergency Response Unit, released results of chemical testing of 18 soil and water samples taken from the area during the last two weeks.

The tests also showed high levels of metals conference in the Cahokia Village Hall this morning, showed 17,000 parts per million of PCBs in an area of the ditch 30 yards south of Queeny Avenue, with decreasing levels as the creek moves south.

The tests also showed high levels of metals in the southern part of the creek, with decreasing amounts farther north.

A sample taken from a private water well in the 100 block of Walnut Street showed the presence of pesticides, but Kelly said they were from a source other than Dead Creek.

Kelly said an extremely high concentration of phosphorous — 12,000 ppm — was found in an area 40 yards north of Judith Lane.

Kelly said the substances posed no serious health threat unless a person were exposed to the chemicals for long periods.

"The materials in this ditch are hazardous only to that extent," Kelly said.

Meanwhile, state agencies are erecting a 4-foot high fence around a half-mile stretch

between Queeny Avenue and Judith Lane to prevent people from kicking up contaminated soil and from dumping in the area.

IEPA officials said it will take time to determine who is responsible for the situation. Officials said they were investigating reports of a buried dump on a three-acre site south of Sauget Village Hall.

Kelly said investigators have checked the length of the creek to the river, but have not taken any samples.

Officials are unsure if any contaminants have gone past Judith Lane. A blocked culvert could have prevented that.

Kelly also tested soil south of Judith Lane to determine if contaminants had spread. Concentrations of metals such as copper, lead, nickel, barium, zinc, and phosphorous were found in a sample taken 25 yards south of Judith Lane.

IEPA officials announced a three-phase plan for handling the Dead Creek situation.

Phase 1 — the chemical testing to determine if there was a health and safety hazard — was announced this morning. Phase 2 will concern itself with the long-term impact of the contamination, as well as determining who is responsible. Phase 3 will address cleanup and disposal. Officials said they did not know how long it would take to complete the investigation.

Last week, the U.S. Coast Guard checked the creek to determine if any contaminants have gone beyond Judith Lane to the Mississippi River. A spokesman for the Coast Guard said there was no evidence of contamination beyond that point. The

Coast Guard becomes involved whenever there is any threat to a navigable waterway, such as the Mississippi.

From where toxic chemicals recently were found in the creek on Judith Lane to the Mississippi River is about 4 miles.

It already was known that Dead Creek, a smoldering and glowing ditch near Illinois 3, has been contaminated with PCBs, a cancer-causing agent, and 19 other toxic chemicals. Earlier IEPA tests had showed PCB levels of 40 ppm in the creek near Judith Lane and 5,200 ppm south of Queeny Avenue.

IEPA officials also are checking into reports that a Sauget landfill on Queeny Avenue near the creek, operated by the late mayor of Sauget, Leo Sauget, may have been used for hazardous waste dumping.

Kelly said officials have received "unofficial and unconfirmed reports primarily from people who have lived in the area for a long time" about the landfill. But he said no immediate conclusions can be drawn from the reports.

"The information is pretty sketchy and conflicting. We don't have anything definite," he said. "All we've got are rumors — a couple of anonymous phone calls. There is a lot of open ground on each side of the ditch."

Sauget was the first mayor of the village of 200 persons, which is tucked between East St. Louis and Cahokia. He operated a 4.5-acre landfill that has been closed for more than 20 years, said his son and present mayor, Paul Sauget.

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